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ABSTRACT

The recent growth in popularity among college students of dramatic interpretation in forensic competition justifies an examination of textual considerations and resultant criteria important to the evaluation of dramatic literature. The first considerations of the student contesplating the dramatic interpretation event are the selection of material that is suitable for solo communication and adaptable to the time constraints of the event, and the selection of remarks to be made prior to the actual reading to establish the scene and characters. For delivery, the interpreter must examine the literary conflict and the climax of the work, as the pacing of a scene is critical to the audience's and the critic/judge's comprehension of the plot. The interpreter must also completely understand the characters' motivations and emotional responses through critical analysis; the critic/judge will react to both the extent to which the interpreter reveals the inner realization of each character and the interpreter's character interaction and dialogue. To be responsible evaluators of dramatic interpretation, critic/judges should have a clear understanding of how content and delivery are closely tied in this literary form, and should be informed concerning its purpose and structure. (HTH)

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JUDGING DRAMATIC INTERPRETATION:

TEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

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JUDGING DRAMATIC INTERPRETATION: TEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Introduction

An examination of the frequency of solo dramatic interpretation as a forensic event as compared to the genre of prose and poetry, clearly indicates that it is the "infant" of the genre-specific solo interpretation forensic events. For example, in the 1979-1980 forensic season, poetry interpretation was offered at 157 tournaments, prose interpretation was offered at 155 tournaments, and dramatic interpretation was offered at 77 tournaments.[1] Nevertheless, in comparison with the 1975-1976 forensic season, dramatic interpretation has experienced the largest percentage growth. While the frequency of offering prose and poetry approximately doubled between 1975 and 1979, the frequency of offering dramatic interpretation has more than quintupled.[2] This recent growth in popularity among college students justifies an examination of textual considerations and resultant judging criteria important to evaluation of dramatic literature.

As an audience member or silent reader of prose and poetic literature, one discovers what is happening or has happened either totally through narration or a combination of narration and dialogue. With few exceptions, it is the narrator and his/her specific point of view that reveals the situation in prose and poetry. Thus most often the narrator is relied upon to describe characters and their actions. However, dramatic literature is

unique in that very seldom is a narrator present but rather only characters. Thus action becomes the essential element. Dramatic literature "is not about characters in action; it is characters in action."[3] While there are many definitions of "drama," for the purpose of this paper attention will be focused on writing which takes the form of a play.

Regardless of whether one is discussing forensic events that are primarily "creative" or "re-creative" in nature, it is possible to discuss them in relation to two general concerns--content and delivery. Obviously in judging forensic events, the relative weight of each of these aspects as well as the specific concerns within each of these two areas will be determined by the nature of the particular event. Thus this examination of the dilemma confronting judges of dramatic interpretation will be organized around textual considerations as they relate to content and delivery.

Textual Considerations and Content Selection:

The first consideration of the student contemplating the dramatic interpretation event is the selection of material. In determining a play's suitability for solo communication, the student must keep in mind characteristics such as " a credible plot, good pace and climax, believable and appealing characters, purposeful and original dialogue, symbolic interest, and emotional excitement."[4] The dialogue in the play should advance the plot.

Plays that are strong in character, mood, thought, and language should be given consideration by the interpreter. The student should avoid plays that are overly dependent on physical activity and visible stage trappings for their impact as well as costume dramas, period pieces, and spectacles.[5]

In selecting dramatic material, the student must be aware of his audience and therefore choose material appropriate to the intellectual level of the audience. Although all plays are set in a specific time and place, the theme or message of the play should have a universality to which the audience can relate. It must be remembered that "the individual member of the audience may read privately whatever his personal tastes dictate, but when he becomes part of an audience, the responsibility for the selection of the play (or a scene, episode, or solo discourse from it) becomes that of the interpreter."[6] In evaluating a given dramatic interpretation, the judge should be concerned with these inherent characteristics of the material and their appropriateness for communication to the audience.

Adaptation:

Since almost no play can be communicated in its entirety in less than ten minutes, the student must select material capable of adaptation to the time constraints of the forensic activity. First of all, the adaptation or "cutting" should be able to stand alone. The cutting may be a complete scene or segments from several scenes that are blended together. However, just as the original play had a beginning, a middle, and an end, so too must

students be careful to adapt the play such that the plot is clearly developed with a definite beginning point which builds to a climax. Needless to say, the adapted work must closely adhere to the intent of the author as reflected in the complete play. A successful cutting is one that "is complete in itself, that leaves a vivid impression, and that creates an earnest desire in the listener to read the complete play."[7]

In part, judges of dramatic interpretation are evaluating the content of the students' messages when they react to students' ability to maintain clarity of purpose, author's intent, and plot in their cuttings. This evaluation is clearly an appropriate function of the critic-judge of dramatic interpretation.

Introduction:

The third area in which the interpreter is making content choices is in the selection of remarks to be made prior to the actual reading. As a result of the student's textual understanding of the play, he/she selects certain statements to make in the introduction. In addition, the judge critically should react to the student's ability to clearly establish the scene and its character(or characters) and to arouse an immediate interest in the play, the cutting, and the characters.

Textual Considerations and Delivery

Plot:

One of the key factors in students' ability to successfully communicate dramatic literature to an audience is their understanding of dramatic structure. Conflict is the essence of plays

and "it is the particular nature of the drama that it concentrates on those relationships that generate difficulties or oppositions and that often produce conflicts."[8] In analyzing the text, the student must determine why the conflict has arisen. Certainly any quality play consists of a major crisis and any number of minor crises. The interpreter's task is to use his/her voice and body to communicate the growing tension within each of these minor crises and the corresponding emotional relaxation that occurs once a particular crisis is resolved. It is this change of pace that is inherent in the play or scene.

The climax, or the point in the play where the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist is so strong that a final decision has to be reached, must be closely analyzed by the interpreter. Since it is the turning point in the play, the interpreter must determine appropriate ways of focusing the audience's attention on the climax by vocal and physical projection. Not only must the student be acutely aware of the overall structure unique to dramatic literature, but its substructure as well. The reader must sense the climactic builds and releases of tension within individual scenes. Just as the tensions within a scene shift, so too do the moods. Thus the student needs to determine both the predominant mood in a given scene as well as the subtle momentary moods wrought by the interaction of the characters.

The critic-judge of dramatic interpretation has an obligation to evaluate each student's ability to project vocally and physically the progression of ideas inherent in the literature

along with the subtle shifts in mood created in a given scene. Thus the pacing of a scene becomes critical to the audience's comprehension of the plot.

Character:

If the audience is to receive a fulfilling experience from the communication of dramatic literature, the student must deal with the element of character as well as plot. Since dramatic literature contains no narrative element, "probably most important in the understanding of a play is an understanding of the characters."[9] The interpreter must completely understand the characters' motivations and emotional responses through critical analysis of not only what each character does and says, but also through what the characters say about each other. The reader's task must include "particular attention to clear, unmistakable characterization."[10] It is through what each character does or doesn't do by means of his/her words and actions that helps the interpreter come to a clear understanding of the author's purpose in the play for each character. The interpreter must attempt to understand not only who each character is, but also what motivates their words and actions at each moment in the cutting. Through parenthetical statements, the dramatist often provides cues for the interpreter concerning sudden changes in mood or attitude of the character.[11] These cues can assist the reader's understanding of the specific emotional demands of given lines the character speaks. Also, factors such as social and intellectual status can be gained by close attention to the language and speaking

style used by each character. The successful re-creation of any cutting of dramatic literature depends first upon the extent to which the interpreter understands why, how, and when each character reacts both from an intellectual as well as an emotional standpoint.

In the evaluation of dramatic interpretation, the critic-judge should react to the extent to which the interpreter reveals the inner realization of each character in the cutting recognizing that "the actor and the interpreter of drama differ primarily in degree of emphasis on certain techniques. In performance, the actor strives for the utmost physical explicitness, while the interpreter relies on suggestion."[12] The critic-judge must react to whether the interpreter has successufully suggested the character in depth as opposed to presenting a flat cardboard figure (unless the author has purposely created a stock character). Reaction to the appropriateness of characteristic facial and bodily attitudes as well as characteristic vocal variables selected by the reader should be important considerations in the critic-judge's evaluation of each interpreter.

Dialogue:

The interpreter must realize that the effective communication of dramatic literature involves not only attention to each character but also the interaction between characters. This demands that the relationship between characters be clearly understood so that the contrasts inherent in the literature will be highlighted. Just as people in real life, characters in a

play not only speak to each other, but they also must listen to each other. The interpreter must realize that a cue can be picked up mentally and physically as well as vocally. In other words, the effective communication of a cutting of dramatic literature does not necessitate that each character begin speaking the moment his/her cue is given. In addition, extensive practice is necessary to avoid momentary lapses into the interpreter's own personality. The reader must work for character consistency as well as character differentiation. The use of focal points can often assist the interpreter in this process but must not be allowed to become the sole distinction between characters. The only way an interpreter can hope to maintain consistent character interaction is through careful and painstaking analysis and preparation of the scene. During this interaction, each character's "outline" must not be allowed to become blurred.

The critic-judge must be sure that interpreters are not simply speaking the characters' words but are also reacting to the other characters. Just as people's words are most often not pre-planned, so must the characters' lines not appear to be pre-planned. Judges should react to whether or not the interpreter gives each character the appropriate non-verbal responses before verbally reacting to what has been said. Of course, the critic-judge should demand that the interpreter pick up cues as appropriate to the literature, but must remember that this pick-up of cues very often are first non-verbal reactions.

Conclusions

Interpretation of dramatic literature relies heavily on technique which "takes time, effort, and experience, and the beginner can only work toward it as a goal, but it lies at the heart of a well-paced, successful performance of drama."[13] This technique is developed such that it does not become the focus of the performance, but rather assists in the re-creation of the dramatic elements inherent in the literary work.

It should be apparent by now that in order to be responsible evaluators of dramatic interpretation, critic-judges must have a clear understanding of how content and delivery are closely tied to the unique form of the genre. It is the obligation of every critic-judge who is likely to be evaluating dramatic interpretation to become informed concerning its purpose and structure. Whenever possible, judges should relate their comments concerning the student's performance to the literature. After all, the goal should not simply be to reward vocal and physical variety or dexterity, but appropriate variety. Otherwise, it might be desirable only to have students do vocal and physical exercises. Instead, judges must insist that the successful communication of the dramatic literature in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety be the primary concern in the evaluation process. The extent to which readers use their voices and bodies to illuminate the text should determine how they are ranked and rated in a given round of dramatic interpretation competition. Thus technique, so important to the successful communication of

a work of dramatic literature, must not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather a means to an end--the bringing of a play to life by an interpreter. As Charlotte Lee states: "He [the interpreter] is on his own, with only the stage directions, his complete understanding of the material, and his body and voice to help him re-create in the minds of his listeners what actors, technicians, and director achieve in a dramatic performance."[14] The comments, then, of the critic-judge must be focused on the extent to which the content and delivery of a given piece of dramatic literature brings an appropriate, meaningful experience to the listener.

ENDNOTES

[1]Jack H. Howe and Jack St. Clair, ed., Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results, XIX (1979-80), p. 97.

[2]Jack H. Howe, ed., Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results, XV (1975-76), p. 99.

[3]Louise M. Scrivner, A Guide to Oral Interpretation (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1968), p. 177.

[4]Ibid., p. 178.

[5]Otis J. Aggertt and Elbert R. Bowen, Communicative Reading (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1972), p. 453.

[6]Keith Brooks, Eugene Bahn, and L. LaMont Okey, The Communicative Act of Oral Interpretation (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975), p. 303.

[7]Ibid., p. 305.

[8]John Gassner, Producing the Play (New York: The Dryden Press, 1941), p. 18.

[9]Aggertt and Bowen, op. cit., p. 455.

[10]Charlotte I. Lee, Oral Interpretation (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1971), p. 269.

[11]Virgil D. Sessions and Jack B. Holland, Your Role in Oral Interpretation (Boston: Holbrook Press, Inc., 1975), p. 280.

[12]Lee, op. cit., 271.

[13]Ibid., p. 337.

[14]Ibid., p. 269.